

Box 1320

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State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

Supplementary Report

OF THE

BOARD OF FEMALE VISITORS TO INSTITUTIONS
WHERE WOMEN ARE IMPRISONED.



*To the Honorable the General Assembly; the Board of Lady
Visitors to Penal and Correctional Institutions, beg leave to
State:*

That their report made on the tenth of February, 1875, has been misunderstood, and regarded as in some sort an attack upon the Board of Trustees of the Reform School. Such was not its intention. That there had been dilatoriness in effecting improvements in the girls' department of the school was so patent that it seemed no wrong to allude to it. Beyond this, the object of the report, so far as it relates to that institution, was to point out what we believe to be radical defects in its organization, and not to indicate faults in the management.

On the 20th of December, 1870, as appears on our records, the ladies of the Board were invited by the Trustees

to be present at their quarterly meeting. It is something more than four years ago. A clerical error in the report, as read before your honorable body, made it five years. The error was perceived and corrected in time for the evening paper, and is rectified in the report as printed by the Legislature. At this meeting, the ladies were asked if they had any suggestions to offer. The alteration first proposed in reply, was the enlargement of the girls' play ground. This was inadequate in size, and was moreover occupied the greater part of the week by wet clothes from the laundry, their being no other place for drying them. The propriety of the change was at once assented to, and we were told that it would be made in the spring, as soon as the frost was out of the ground. Both the request and the reply to it are remembered by ladies of the Board, and also, by a gentleman, not a Trustee, who was present on the occasion. In the memorial to your honorable body recently presented by the Board of Trustees of the Reform School, it is stated that "a proposed enlargement of the girls' play-ground was first brought before the Board of Trustees three years ago last November as appears by their own records." If the Secretary of the Board of Trustees failed to make record of what took place at the meeting held December 20th, 1870, nearly a year before, the fault is not ours.

At this same meeting of December 20th, 1870, at which the ladies were present by invitation, besides the enlargement of the girls' play-ground, two other subjects, as appears also on our records, were brought to the attention of the Board of Trustees. It was suggested that the older girls employed in the sewing-room, who accomplished a very large amount of work, should receive a small compensation, a few cents for every garment made, to be retained for them until the time of their release. It was thought by the ladies that this would tend to sweeten and render more cheerful

their toil while in the institution and leave them not wholly dependent on coming out. In reply, we were told that the Board were unable to accede to our request. They had not the requisite authority. It was also asked that an alteration might be made in the seating of the girls in the chapel. Difficulties were perceived by the gentlemen in effecting the proposed change, although we were allowed to understand that the subject would be held for consideration. In its discussion since at meetings of our board, some difference of opinion has been developed. A large majority, however, of both former and present members, have believed the remote and isolated position of the girls in the chapel to be lowering to their self-respect, as well as unfriendly to the benefit to be hoped for from its services. These views had been frequently expressed to individual trustees, and to those immediately in charge of the school; and finally a formal request to the Board was made in October last. The result has been given in the memorial.

At a meeting of our Board, held April 10th, 1872, the committee visiting at the Reform School, as appears by the records, reported that the girls in the laundry were too small in size and too few in number to do the large amount of washing and ironing required in the institution, and that unless their work could be in some way lightened, assistance ought to be furnished them. At the next monthly meeting held May 8th, the same committee reported, we quote from the records, "that they were more than ever convinced, that the girls in the laundry were overworked, in which opinion the matron having charge agreed, but said it was beyond her power to make it different." The chairman of the Ladies' Board had in the meantime seen both the chairman and the secretary of the Board of Trustees on the subject. At the meeting held June 15th, the same committee reported that no change had been made in the service of the laundry; that

the Superintendent maintained with considerable warmth that the girls were not overworked, and that no additional help was required. As the ladies deemed it useless to make further remonstrance, the matter was there allowed to rest. In the course of the summer, water from the Pawtuxet was introduced into the building, and changes were made in the appointments of the laundry, which afforded to the girls employed in it, the relief which they had so long needed. Now we do not attribute this delay of action to any indifference on the part of the trustees to the welfare of the girls. We can readily believe that with the lights which they had, they honestly doubted the urgency of the case ; but we ask your honorable body, when the question is, how many hours in the week ought a girl of sixteen to stand at the wash-tub or the ironing table, which is the best qualified to decide it, a board of the busiest gentlemen in Providence or a jury of matrons ?

In the memorial above referred to, the ladies are charged not only with inconsistency, but with making contradictory statements, and to sustain this charge, phrases and sentences taken out of their connection are introduced from several of our reports. By a singular looseness of ideas or a disregard of accuracy under the circumstances hardly justifiable, what we say of the inmates is applied to the institution. A quotation from our fourth report, " the girls appear more hopeful and happy " is translated into " a state of things so hopeful and happy." Still more remarkable, what is said in the same report of the younger, and therefore more encouraging age of the girls, is quoted as a commendation of the school. The apparently different language applied to the same girls in two successive years, is adverted to by our critics. The most cursory examination of the context would have furnished the explanation. In the first instance, these girls are referred to in connection with older and more

hardened offenders, who, for the most part, are now sent to other institutions. In comparison with these, their prospect for reformation is said to be hopeful. In the second instance they are considered in relation to street children, who have not yet been guilty of any grave misconduct, and who if placed in a properly ordered home might grow up to be respectable and useful members of society. In comparison with this latter class of girls, their case is spoken of as affording little ground for hope.

The best refutation of the charge of inconsistency will be found in the reports themselves. While we have referred with pleasure to the neatness, order, and external propriety characterizing the school, we have not disguised our dissatisfaction with the organization of the girls' department, or with the principles on which it is conducted. It is from a conviction of the radical defects of this department that in all our reports, since the first year, we have appealed to your honorable body for a separate school, differently constituted and more truly adapted in its provisions to the ends of reformation. At the very commencement of our visits to the institution, the Superintendent said to one of our members, that for the boys, he considered it a Reform School, but for the girls, such was the hopelessness of their condition, it was merely a House of Correction. So grave a statement led us to a careful study, not only of the characters of the girls, but also of the system upon which the hope of their reformation rested. While studying the latter, we have closely watched its actual workings and results.

Our first report was made January 17, 1871, only four months from the time of our organization. It was not till after this that the cases of abuse occurred to which allusion was incidentally made in our late report. They consisted of what we regarded as excessive and degrading punishments. They were spoken of to individual Trustees, upon whom

they did not make the impression we had reason to expect. The facts were afterward made known to members of the City Council, with whom we were informed the ultimate responsibility rested. As from that time, no recurrence of objectionable punishments came within our knowledge, it was not thought necessary to refer to the subject in our second report, which was not presented till the May Session, 1872,—sixteen months after the first. We trust that this statement will sufficiently explain to the memorialists why the ladies in "their first annual report, written when the impressions of their early visits must have been fresh upon their minds," made no mention of abuses. At the date of that report, we did not know of their existence.

In the endeavor apparently to give an air of extravagance and absurdity to the things asked for by the lady visitors, there are some striking illustrations of the plasticity of language in the hands of a master. In order that it may be understood how justly the requests which have been made are characterized, it becomes necessary to go into particulars which we would gladly avoid.

Early in our acquaintance with the Reform School, the attention of one of our number was called to the girls' bathing, and she became satisfied that it was not conducted on the best hygienic or moral principles. An investigation was commenced, but, owing to various causes, which we need not here mention, it was not followed up at that time. Last autumn the subject was again brought up at a meeting of the Board, by one of the members, who had looked into the matter and found everything about it extremely unsatisfactory. After consultation, so great was our desire to avoid unnecessary interference, that the subject was left for further inquiry. After another report from the same member, we finally concluded that the time had arrived for action. Feeling sure that bathing in common in the laundry, fur-

nished only with washtubs, was for neither the moral nor the physical well-being of the girls, we decided to ask that some suitable arrangements be made which should secure privacy; and further, thinking the influence of the matron, who superintended the girls' ablutions, not unimportant, and believing there was room for choice in respect to the person who should perform the duty, we resolved to ask, "that the baths might be under the care of a matron of our selection *from among those employed in the school.*" This, in the memorial, is transformed into a request, "that the selection of one of the subordinate officers of the Institution, should be placed in the hands of the Board of Visitors."

Another subject which had early claimed our attention was the hours of study. These hours, summer and winter, for children ranging from ten years upward, have always been since our acquaintance with the school, from half-past five to seven, before breakfast in the morning, and from five to seven after supper in the evening; thus giving time for a full day's work between. This rule is the same in both departments of the school, but has borne more heavily upon the girls, as from the limited extent and condition of their play-ground they have had scarcely any outdoor air and exercise. This subject, alluded to in our first report, has since been often discussed not only in our meetings, but with the officers of the school and with individual Trustees. Believing the arrangement to be an unsuitable one, conformable to neither humanity or right reason, we decided to ask of the Trustees a change in the hours of study.

At a meeting held towards the close of the year, a request was received from the Trustees, that certain suggestions which had been made to individual members should be put into writing and officially communicated to the Board. While we were considering the topics embraced in this request, there came up a subject which had many times been

before us. During the four years of our service, we had given much thought to the actual condition of these girls in every respect, conscientiously endeavoring to make ourselves acquainted with the causes which led to their detention in this institution, and the bad reputation stamped upon them here, until we were thoroughly and unitedly convinced, that much of the evil was due to physical causes, for the removal of which no adequate provision had been made. A consultation was held with a highly cultured woman physician, who has had long experience in European hospitals, as well as large opportunities among a similar class of children in this country, and she threw much light on the subject and gave us valuable advice. All this resulted in an unanimous decision to request for these poor girls, the employment of a woman physician, with whom we could freely confer. Therefore, we added this to the other requests we had purposed to make.

The following resolutions were accordingly adopted and transmitted to the Board of Trustees:

“ *Resolved*, That we request of the Board of Trustees of the Reform School, that the hours of instruction in the school-room shall hereafter be between eight and twelve in the morning or been one and four in the afternoon.”

“ Also—that the baths of the girls shall be under the care of a matron of our selection, *from among those employed in the school*, and that the bath-room shall be so arranged as to secure privacy to every girl.”

“ Also, that a woman physician shall be employed to visit the Reform School at stated times, to give to the girls such attention as she may find that they require.”

We respectfully submit for your consideration the question, whether in these resolutious, there was anything worthy of the censure implied in the following extract from the communication of, the Trustees to your honorable body:

"In response to this request the Trustees received a communication dated January 13, 1875, which, however, instead of being the former verbal suggestions, reduced to writing, was found to contain others, now for the first time brought to the notice of the Trustees; one that in place of the present accomplished and faithful medical attendant, a female physician should be employed for the girls, and the other, that the selection of one of the subordinate officers of Institution should be placed in the hands of the Board of Visitors."

It is with sincere regret that we go into these explanations and corrections; but, after the representation made to your honorable body, a proper self-respect compels us to do it. We specially ask that nothing we have said may be understood as reflecting upon the conduct or purposes of those to whom the management of the Providence Reform School is entrusted. They are gentlemen of high character, laboring at a task beset with many and great difficulties, with the hope of no other reward than the good they may be able to accomplish. Labors of benevolence are always sufficiently thankless and never more so than when their aim is reformatory. If in our recent report, we have dwelt more upon the inadequacy and defects of the girl's department of the school, than in former years, it is not because we have felt them more strongly. We had no purpose of casting censure on the immediate management, under the system upon which the school is conducted. We believe it to be in quite as good a condition as at any previous time. We think a gentler spirit and a more thoughtful regard for the welfare of the girls are apparent. The feeling of discouragement to which we alluded is not, as assumed by the memorialists, the growth of a single year, but the sorrowful result of more than four years of careful observation and patient labor and thought. With an earnestness springing

from deep and settled convictions, we have again and again asked your attention to the defects of the institution, not for the purpose of giving pain, as we pray you to believe, or disturbing sensibility in any quarter; but with the hope of impressing your honorable body with the importance of a State Industrial School, on a plan broad enough to include with proper classification, not only the unfortunates, who have already gone astray, but, that more numerous class in our streets, who though not yet contaminated, are on the direct road to ruin. Such an institution should we think, be entirely separate from a school for boys, should be in the country, and, we will add, should be under the direction of a Board, composed largely of women.

All which is respectfully submitted.

ABBY W. CHACE.

ELIZABETH B. CHACE.

ELIZA C. WEEDEN.

ELLEN K. BUFFUM.

HARRIET A. COOK.